



GREGERS REIMANN
Managing Director of IEN
Consultants, the pioneering
green building consultancy
in Malaysia.

HEALTHY BOTTOM LINE with HEALTHY BUILDINGS

*"We shape our buildings,
and afterwards our buildings
shape us."*

The sentiment of this statement by Sir Winston Churchill in 1943 has been so easily lost in today's built environment as developers, designers and engineers strive to create stylistic buildings that are at once pleasing to the eye, but only so often have a positive impact on our life and wellbeing.

With over 500 registered projects in over 30 countries covering more than 100 million ft², one third of which is located in Asia, the WELL Building Standard is pushing boundaries to create buildings that improve human health, happiness and overall wellbeing. This makes perfect sense - also financially - in countries like Malaysia where populations increasingly are suffering from unhealthy lifestyles, low workplace productivity and bad air quality. The cost from adverse health and worker productivity effects is enormous, hence, making a good financial case for implementing the WELL Standard. Moreover, to begin with, don't we want our buildings to improve health and the feeling of wellbeing?



Authors Gregers Reimann and Sheena Moses enjoying daylight, plants and fresh fruit - all WELL certification features - in their pantry space at IEN Consultants, Malaysia's pioneering green building consultancy. Photo credit: IEN Consultants



You would probably be thinking at this point, with so many green building certification schemes already in place, why bother with another one? Don't they all already cover the key issues pertaining to human health and wellbeing? The answer is no, only partially, and unlike WELL, typically not as predominantly mandatory requirements. Most of the existing green building certification schemes have a broader focus which includes the site selection, the construction phase, the use of environmentally friendly materials, access to public transport and the energy and water efficiency during operations, all of which have little or no influence on the health and wellbeing of the building occupants. This is especially for Core & Shell certifications for office buildings, where only the common spaces (lift lobbies, toilets etc.) are meeting the green building certification standards. The WELL Standard therefore goes perfectly hand-in-hand with the existing green building certification schemes.

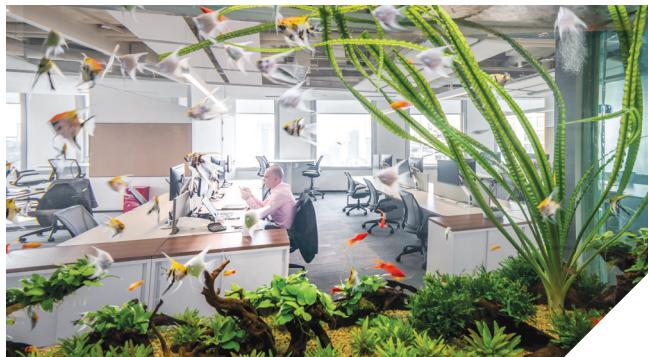
Interestingly, the WELL Standard was created by an ex-partner of Goldman & Sachs, Paul Scialla, who was persuaded by the immense financial logic of the WELL Building Standard. With attractive ROIs related to overall health care cost-savings, worker productivity increase, reduced sick days, and intangible benefits such as improved sales from better customer experience and increased work value produced by employees, the WELL Building Standard provides a great business case - one that, in this region, has been picked up very quickly by China where WELL certification is highest outside of the US.

The WELL Standard addresses seven key elements that have significant impact on our daily lives – Air, Water, Nourishment, Light, Fitness, Comfort, and Mind. From these seven elements, more than 100 features are available to be applied to each building project. All these features have been developed through an evidence-based approach that looks at scientific and medical research on environmental health, behavioural factors and demographic risk factors that affect our health.

Let's talk about Air. The Global Air Pollution crisis has been recently called a crisis that "threatens the continuing survival of Human Societies" by the Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health. Studies conducted have also addressed pollution to be the largest environmental cause of poor health, responsible for some 7-8 million deaths a year and costing nations like Indonesia an estimated RM160 billion (\$35 billion) in economic losses.

"...eating unhealthily can be linked to a 66% increased risk of productivity loss."

With all that going on outdoors, you may be pleased to know that 90% of our time is actually spent indoors, be it in our workplace, home or even in the car stuck in traffic. But before we take a sigh of relief in knowing that, it may be a better idea to hold your breath as concentrations of some pollutant indicators can actually be 2-5 times higher indoors compared to outdoors. In fact, we have had to invent the term "Sick Building Syndrome" to describe building conditions that cause the occupants to experience health and comfort effects that can be linked to the number of hours spent in a building. The WELL Standard tackles this issue by making it a mandatory requirement to provide filtered outdoor air into the occupied spaces whilst controlling the levels of toxic chemicals that are present within the indoor space.

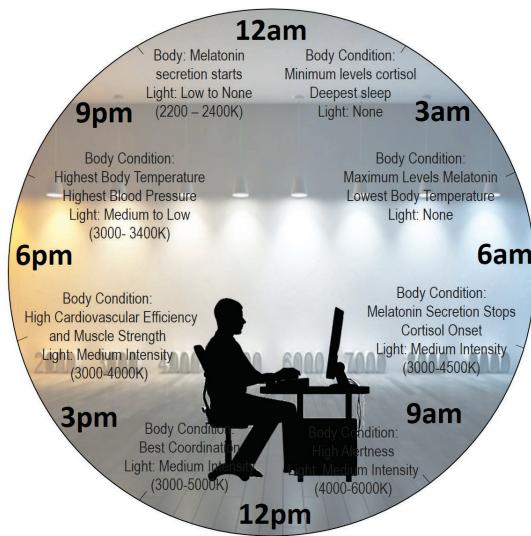


Biophilic office design with a see-through aquarium at a WELL certified JLL office in Shanghai. Photo credit: JLL

A WELL element that's commonly very intriguing to most would be the one on Nourishment and Fitness. How can a building affect the way we eat, and why would our exercise routines matter to our employers? Our workplace and schools are actually two of five places that account for over 75% of what we eat. Studies issued under the Population Health Management Journal shows that eating unhealthily can be linked to a 66% increased risk of productivity loss. This may very well be a large factor in Malaysia's staggering high levels of absenteeism and presenteeism, which is when employees turn up to work but are unproductive. This happens 66 days per year for Malaysians, which is more than twice as high as the UK figure at 30 days per year. It is also no surprise that Malaysia has been identified as the fattest nation in Asia with 42% of the population being overweight and 14% obese, in part because more than half of Malaysians have been reported to practice inactive lifestyles (defined as weekly exercise amounting to less than 150 minutes).

The WELL Building Standard looks at impacting our dietary and fitness lifestyles by setting forth preconditions that call for building owners to make available healthy food options, to establish transparency and clarity of food contents to guide occupants in making more informed decisions about the food they eat, to introduce exercising facilities and programmes that inspire healthy lifestyles, and to create connections with nature via the introduction of biophilic designs and designing spaces with ergonomics, thermal comfort and mindfulness as guiding principles.

Another significant impact on occupant happiness is the amount of light the building occupants are exposed to as this affects their circadian rhythms, our very own built-in 24-hour biological clock that cycles between alertness and sleepiness. Research shows that mental function and memory recall are improved by 10-25% for workers with comfortable natural lighting. A WELL building is designed in accordance to circadian lighting principles which allows our bodies to release the necessary hormones that regulate sleep and awake patterns in our daily lives, reducing risks of stress and immune system breakdowns. As with all our bodily functions, there are scientific explanations as to why we tend to fall sick after several long nights with continuous computer-screen time.



The human circadian rhythm and the optimal light levels and colour temperatures (K) throughout the day.

Marketed well, properties which place an emphasis on occupant healthcare can have a significant impact on buyer impressions, yielding higher market values. Business owners can also experience reduced

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healthcare costs from reduced building-related illnesses. Ultimately, happiness in the workplace results in reduced stress, which results in less sick days. There is a simple yet scientifically justifiable theory to all this: happiness levels can be increased by the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter

that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure sensors. Low levels of dopamine can lead to lack of motivation, fatigue, memory loss and lack of concentration, but can be naturally increased by a healthier lifestyle which includes physical exercise, healthy food intake, well-regulated sleep time and even meditation.

Let's do a WELL calculation exercise in the Malaysian context using our own office as an example, where 81% of our company's monthly expenditure goes to staff salaries, while other expenses (15%) and rental (4%) account for the rest of the expenses. From the employer's perspective, under the assumption that by following the WELL Standard absenteeism and presenteeism can be reduced to half, this would mean that by paying the same salary, a yield of an extra 33 work days is obtained from each employee, corresponding to a 15% increase in productivity. For a 1000m² fully staffed office, this would mean an increase in productivity worth RM340,000 (\$80,000) every year. The WELL certification cost is just RM47,000 for the refurbishment of an existing office. This, however, excludes the cost for the refurbishment itself, which varies from project to project.



Cartoon by Bjorn Bull Hansen, IEN Consultants.

With this impressive business case, it's no wonder that the uptake of the new WELL certification is seeing a high annual growth rate, exceeding that of the green building certification scheme (LEED) when it was first launched. It is dawning upon employers that it's expensive not to look after the health and wellbeing of your staff, and the WELL Standard offers a good way of getting there.